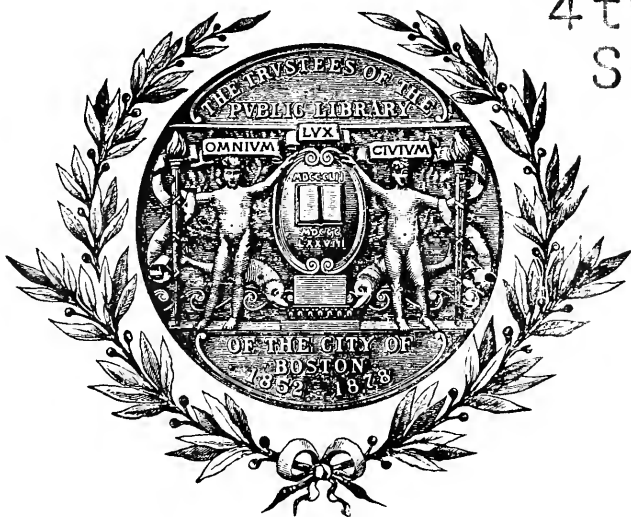


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THE PERFECT LAW OF THE LORD.

BY

REV. WILLIAM H. LYON, D.D.



AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,

BOSTON.

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THE

PERFECT LAW OF THE LORD.

“The law of the LORD is perfect.” — Ps. xix. 7.

WHEN the intellectual history of this age shall be written, and the thinker of the future shall sum up its characteristics in a word, that word will be *law*. The real world about us, the age has discovered, is not phenomena but forces; and these forces act not capriciously, but by fixed principles. The world of nature is built up, not like a pile of stones, by the addition of one independent phenomenon after another, but as a plant grows; each new fact springing from the one before it, and formed by a central force, which runs through each succeeding event as the sap of the plant runs through root and stalk and stem and bud.

But there is one application of this idea of law which we fail to make, and yet it is the one we most need to make, namely, to our moral life. In spite of our belief in the reign of law in nature, we fail to appreciate its reign in the nobler and higher realm of the inward life. The point which I wish to make clear is, that there are moral laws as well as natural laws; that the forces which work to make us what we are at any time are as unchangeable, as subject to the fixed succession of cause and effect, as the force of gravitation or electricity.

No doubt the reason why we do not detect the moral laws, is that we are accustomed to think of the moral life as immediately formed by the will. It is the one spot in the world where there is no orderly succession of events, but simply what the man chooses to do or to be at the time. It is sort of a District of Columbia, where the central power is supreme. When a man commits a crime, we lay it all to the choice of the moment. We do not think of it as having sprung from an accumulation of force in his heart, as a flash of lightning bursts out of an accumulation of electricity in the atmosphere. When a young man looks ahead into life, and sees temptations waiting for him, he says to himself: "All I have to do when I get to that temptation is to resolve not to yield to it, and the victory is won in a moment." It does not occur to him that there are moral forces behind his will which practically may prove too strong for it.

I say *practically*, because I mean that while it may be almost always *possible* for a man to resist a temptation or do a good deed (though even here we are in the world of mystery), yet, as a matter of fact, it is the condition of a man's character at the time which determines whether he *will* resist, whether he will do, or not. For a man's will works upon his life as it works upon the outward world, not directly, but through forces which he controls. When he wishes to swim against a stream, he does not merely stretch out his arms, and will to go ahead. He has to summon up his muscular strength. If he has enough, he goes up stream as his will dictates; but if he has been ill, or for any other reason has been losing his muscular power, he may will as much as he chooses, but the relentless stream forces him back, and if there are rapids or falls behind him, over he goes. So a man resists the temptation, we will say to lie, not merely by willing, but by laying

hold of the power of truthfulness which he already has, bracing himself against the conscientiousness which is already deposited in him. If he has weakened his moral powers by the practice of lying, I will not say that he cannot resist the temptation, but the chances are that he will not resist it. The stream of contrary desire, grown strong by long indulgence, will sweep him over the precipice of the lie almost before he knows it.

So, whatever be the metaphysics of the will, the practical fact is that wrong doing grows out of moral weakness, and right doing grows out of moral strength; and the practical problem of the moral life is to increase the stock of moral force.

But the moment we try to do this, we find that the character grows by law as strictly as the tree grows. Just as you cannot create a tree in a day, so you cannot create a strong and healthy character by an act of will or a few moments of moral effort. It is a growth, and the result of laws which work as accurately and as unchangingly as the plainest law of the outward world.

Take a single example of these laws, the law of exercise.

The law of exercise is the same in the moral life as in the physical; the power which is used grows in exact proportion to its use, and the power which is unused decreases in exact proportion to its neglect. The blacksmith's arm does not gain strength more surely and regularly by every stroke on his anvil, than his moral nature gains strength by every blow against temptation or for a good purpose. And just as surely as the blacksmith's arm is weakened by every day's neglect of work, so surely is his moral will weakened by every neglect of duty. We see this illustrated every day in practical life. What is a spoiled child but one who has had everything done for

him, or who has never been forced to exert his power of self-control, until, like the blacksmith who has had his work done for him, he has no strength of will, and cannot concentrate his mind or his moral powers upon anything worth doing? Or, here is a moral Rip Van Winkle, who has let his better nature sleep for a long time while he has thrown himself into all sorts of dissipation. At last he comes to himself. "This won't do. I must change my way of living. It is high time for me to be up and making something out of my life." But what does it mean, this stiffness of the joints, this weakness of the whole system, this almost unconquerable desire to lie down again, this feeble ambition for anything good or useful? The want of exercise has weakened whatever power was neglected. If the will is ever to be again the fresh and strong force it was, it will not be by a mere desire to do this or that, but by a persistent and careful strengthening of the power of self-control, such as a convalescent must give to his legs and arms. He must put up with a great many falls and failures. He must have patience, and a strong faith in the perfect law of God in the soul as well as in the corn-field. And what a man needs, who is not simply trying to bring himself up to the level of a former virtue, but to climb higher than he ever was before, to some ideal height, is not to wait for fortunate circumstances or influences, but to remember the simple law of exercise. When a thoughtful man looks on at any of those acrobatic feats which are so astonishing sometimes, he realizes that months and years of patient practice have gone into every one of them. There is almost no achievement of mankind that has not come by long and patient drilling. That easy run of the pianist, so light and graceful, apparently as natural and unconstrained as the patter of the rain on the roof, — do not let it deceive

you,—it is the delicate distillation of years of patient drudgery. What a wonderful genius Liszt is! How that polonaise of his soars as light and free as a lark! But under his genius were laid from twelve to fourteen hours a day of hard practice for years, says his biographer. A lady said to one of the English poets of the last century: “What a beautiful line that is! I envy you the power to make so much beauty with so little effort.” “Madam,” said the poet, “it was four years before I was willing to let that line go, and I am not satisfied with it yet.” It is easy to heap up such illustrations of the power of patient exercise in the physical and the mental spheres. But we miss their deepest lesson if we do not see that the same law which works there, works in the making of character. The strong will grows out of the past as well as the strong arm. The delicate sense of right and wrong comes by long exercise, as well as the flexible fingers of a Rubinstein; and the music of a well-ordered and sweetly harmonized life is the product of years of patient practice in the arts of self-control and self-sacrifice.

There is no need of enumerating all the laws by which character grows. The essential thing is to see that it is a growth and not a sudden creation. We have cast the idea of miracle out of our physical life. We know that there is no such thing as an event in nature which has no connection with anything before or about it. We need to narrow our expectation of miracle in the moral life; for while we cannot help believing that the will has the power of stepping in and changing our moral tendencies to some extent, yet it is very certain that we have supposed it to have more power than it really has. It really governs only a small part of the character. We might compare it to the soft tip by which the root of a tree grows. That tip is very sensitive to all influences of heat or cold, dry-

ness or moisture, and to any resistance. It grows or stops growing, goes straight on or curves around a stone, according to the necessities of the time, with a power that seems wonderfully like intelligence. But when once it has advanced, the root behind it begins to harden and become encased with bark, and is no longer sensitive or movable. What the root finally is in shape and in direction, is the result of what that free little tip has done for it day by day. We may change the direction of the tip, but not easily that of the root it has once made.

The character of any man at a given time is like that root. It is the result of a long process of growth. To a very large extent it is hard and unchangeable by any sudden influence. It is free to move only at a small point. Even that point starts from where yesterday's growth ended, and its freedom to move is limited to a narrow range. That is to say, when I stand facing a temptation, it is not as if I had never faced one before, nor as if my ancestors had not done it for me before I was born. My feeling toward it, and my resolve to deal with it, start from the point where my own past life has left me; and my freedom to deal with it is limited by my attachment behind to old habits and to my entire nature. I am not *entirely* governed by them. I do have this free and sensitive tip to my character, but I cannot ignore the past nor the limitations which it has imposed upon me. The law of the Lord is perfect. Whatever I have sowed in my soul has grown, though I have forgotten I ever did it. I have forgotten that I yielded to this temptation yesterday. But God has not forgotten; and when I face that temptation to-day, it is harder to deal with than it was. I have forgotten that I had that tough wrestle with an old fault yesterday. But when I face it again to-day, it is not quite as strong as it was. In neither case is it or can

it be as if I had not lived yesterday. My character has grown on one side or the other by a law, which is unerring and unsleeping.

There is this one very wide difference between our will and the tip of the root, that we can change the character which the past growth has made for us. We can, by extraordinary effort, sometimes straighten our crookednesses and strengthen our weaknesses. But still the principle remains that it must be done by the laws of character, and not by any independent and sudden exercise of will. It is true that we hear of sudden conversions and great life-crises which make deep changes in men's characters. But they are like explosions of gunpowder. There are other conditions to be considered besides the spark or the present stimulus. The spark would not have exploded a pile of black sand, nor would the eloquence of Wesley or the presence of death have softened the heart of a man in a different moral condition. The fact that several people can listen to the same pleading or pass through the same crisis with such different results upon their character proves that no man is free from his past acts or influences. What he has been must always determine to a very large extent what he will be. And even in the case of genuine sudden conversions, the result is not to wipe out old scores of sin, but to give new strength to the good in the battle.

Who does not know, whether in those deep conversions which shake the whole life, or in those more common enthusiasms for goodness which sometimes stir in us all, that the old nature still remains, with its habits and its biases and its spots, and that when the first flush of ecstasy has passed, the real battle has yet to be fought? After conversion, said the old theology, must come sanctification, the gradual and persistent rooting out of the sin which the past has fixed in us. That is why so few con-

versions last, — not because they are not real at the beginning, but because the character has not stamina enough to endure so long a struggle, or because the convert is disappointed to find that the law of the Lord is perfect, and that he must reap what he has already sown before he can plant the new crop.

The conclusion of the whole matter is this: Let no man fondly imagine that he can indulge himself in a wrong course of life as long as he chooses, and then check himself suddenly when there is real danger ahead. Every hour of indulgence weakens the will and strengthens the chains that hold it down. Every day of floating in the current brings him to where it is stronger, and increases the momentum in which he rushes toward the rapids of a very serious crisis in his life, if not to the falls of a sure ruin. There is no future time at which he will be as free as he is to-day. He will be sweeping either toward the right or toward the wrong with a force which grows with every hour. There are influences which come in unforeseen, and which sometimes stir a man to do more than he would of himself; just as people who live a careless and shiftless life are sometimes saved from a beggared old age by the timely will of a rich relative. But if it is folly to let one's pecuniary prosperity depend upon such outward chances, it is doubly foolish to leave one's character to the mercy of unforeseen influences, for even if they come we may not be able to take advantage of them. The providence which really interferes to save us in moral crises is the momentum of our past character.

“Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.”

Let us take a step farther. There is no reason to think that the law of God by which the past of a human life is

the starting point of its future, stops working at death. Unless we deny any existence at all hereafter, I do not see how we can help feeling that the momentum which life here has given to a man may continue to sweep him on towards his proper end in the life hereafter.

We are fond of saying that a death-bed repentance cannot save a man, because a moment cannot undo the work of a lifetime. But carry that idea further. Suppose that a man who has given himself up to the current of his evil passions, and allowed himself to be whirled along faster and faster by it, at last disappears from sight still rushing on with that fearful momentum. What then? I should not dare to say that there are no new influences which may work against the bad in him and stay his terrible course. I should not dare to set limits to the Divine resources, nor say what could or could not be done for him. But when I see how perfect the law of God is in this life, how as a man grows old in wickedness his character hardens and "sets" like a plaster image, nay, how the evil tendencies of his younger days come out from their hiding places in a more repulsive form than ever, and when I see this stiffening process still going on in him as he passes out of sight into the great unknown, I cannot smile with that optimistic confidence which some easy-going people seem to have, and say that I am *sure* it will be all right with him. At the very least, the way of return will not be short nor easy, and for all I *know*, or anybody else knows, the hardening process may go on forever. The mistake in the old doctrine is that it arbitrarily sets the limit of change at death. But death is a physical, not a moral, crisis. There is no more reason for setting the limit of change there than at any previous moment. But that the probability of change does grow less and less, and that there *may* be a point somewhere in the dim future beyond

which it is extremely improbable that the soul will ever return to virtue, seems to me the plainest common sense.¹

So that conception of law which is dawning upon our view of the moral life does not decrease responsibility, as hasty people sometimes think; it makes it vastly greater and more solemn. If there be *no* relation of cause and effect in the moral life, if at any time a man can do just what he chooses, then let us do what we choose to-day, for to-morrow we can begin all over again if we like; but if the reign of law extends into the character, if the power of habit means anything, if the future grows out of the past as the unbending tree out of the flexible sapling, then what we do to-day in this world is a very grave thing, and life has gained a new seriousness, not a new recklessness, from the idea of "a perfect law of the Lord."

¹ I have spoken of the pains and penalties of moral evil or of wrong doing in the world to come. How long they will endure, I know not. Whether they will issue in the reformation and happiness of the sufferer, or will terminate in the extinction of his conscious being, is a question on which the Scripture throws no clear light. Plausible arguments may be adduced in support of both these doctrines. — W. E. CHANNING: *The Evil of Sin*.

There is virtue in sorrow to educate and perfect the good, but none that we can see to reclaim the wicked. It does not appear that punishment in this world has always the effect, or has in the majority of cases the effect, to reform the sinner; contrariwise, it is notorious that men continue to sin and suffer to the day of their death. What authority have we for supposing that this process is arrested hereafter; or for not supposing that the sinner will go on sinning and suffering everlastingly, or till evil becomes so predominant in the soul as utterly to quench its moral life, and conscious suffering ends in everlasting death? Who shall say that sin, once established, may not grow to be supreme and irremediable, — that the habit of transgression contracted in this world, and confirmed by every fresh transgression, may not become a necessity of nature strong as fate and deep as life? — F. H. HEDGE: *Reason in Religion*, page 393.

A new seriousness, and yet a new confidence, — “The law of the Lord is *perfect*.” It does not work on one side alone. It does not merely keep the evil and the weakness we entrust to it. It keeps the strength and the goodness too. There is no *pure* influence to which that sensitive tip of our will has exposed itself which has not drawn us toward good. There is no noble direction toward which it has not stiffened, and given a permanent tendency to our lives. The good we have done will stand by us. Nothing but an evil present can nullify a good past; and in what we are to-day, every resistance to temptation, every act of charity and love and nobility has laid its stone.

As to the future, this idea of law, though it vindicates the terrible truth of the old doctrine, tears away its terrible fallacies. How many a death of a noble man or woman has left a horrible agony in the hearts of those who are left behind, at the thought that a lifetime of justice and honor has been of no use, because certain church rites have not been observed, or certain creeds believed! The anguish of bereavement is great enough at its best; but when to the necessity of parting for a few years is added the terrible conviction of parting for eternity, for some alleged sin in the loved one which the Church has created, but would not pardon, for which no amount of natural loveliness or genuine nobleness could atone, — then what a fearful thing the hour of death has been made! That blasphemy is not all dead yet, even in its most terrible form. Only a few weeks ago, said a letter to the “Christian Register,” a mother went insane when the minister told her that her baby was forever lost because it had not been baptized. It is a commonplace to hear that said of grown people; but the new day of common sense is dawning. Thank God that honest men may at last die in peace. For the law of the Lord is perfect, and no law of the

Church can change it. What a man has gained he keeps, here or hereafter, if he is only true to it. When we see a man whose life has been full of honest endeavor after righteousness passing out into the dark hereafter, we shall think of him as an oarsman who has pulled his best so far, and, though he may rest on his oars as he shoots under the dark bridge, we shall know that his moral momentum will carry him through till he takes stroke again on the other side.

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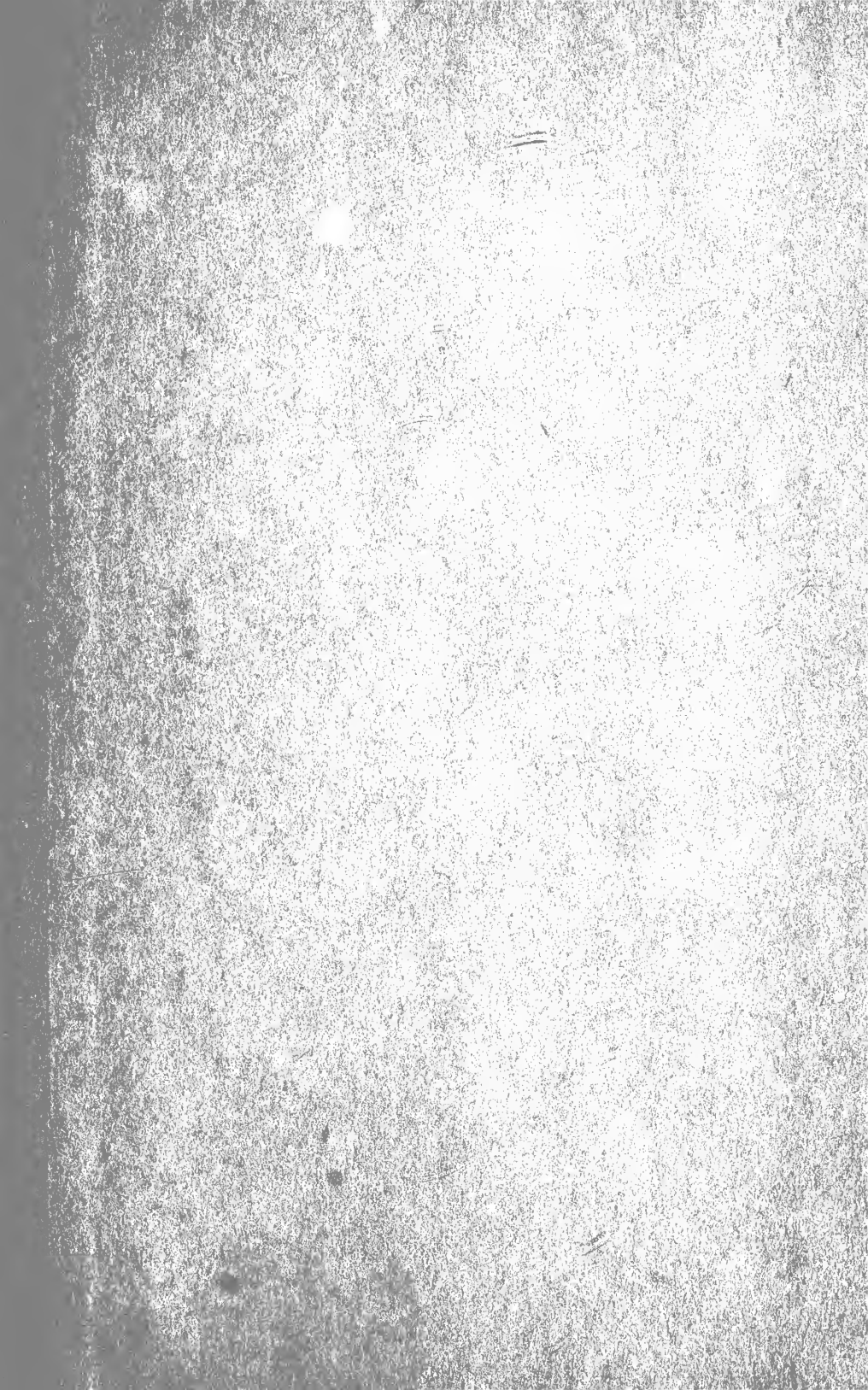
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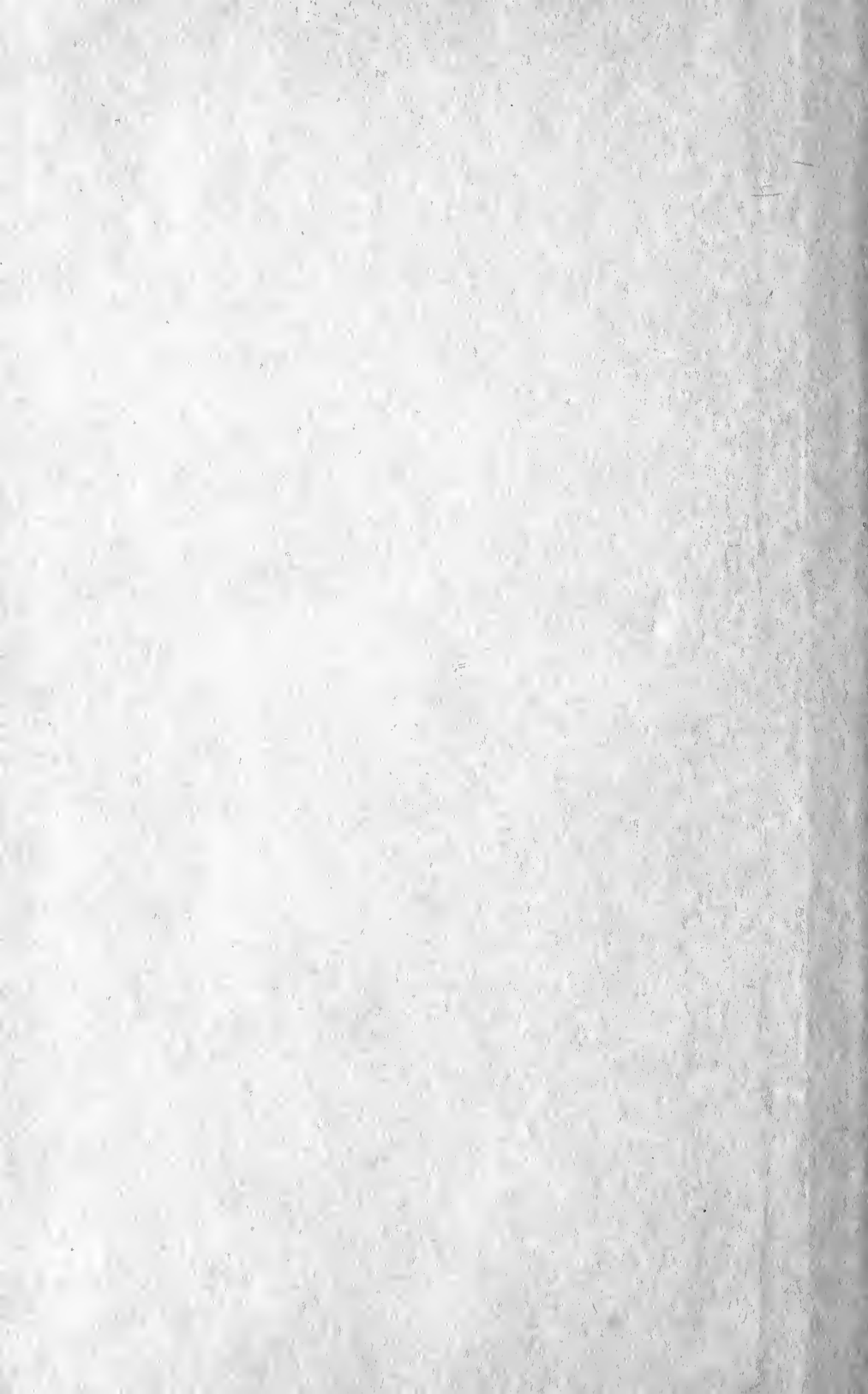
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